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Research First? Assessing the Role of Special Collections Librarians in Academia

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Abstract

In academic libraries, one of the lesser-explored discussions surrounds the value and validity of research done by librarians outside of their own professional literature (LIS). For this study, the authors surveyed seventy-five special collections librarians to assess their research activity; perspectives on non-LIS research; and experiences in the workplace regarding credit for non-LIS research. The quantitative data shows a large majority of respondents favored research outside of LIS, while the qualitative responses revealed strong opinions on research in and out of the profession, what constitutes a superior librarian, and the tenets of academic freedom. Almost all respondents agreed that the special collections librarian needs to make scholarship a priority in order to succeed and advance in the profession. Given the responses, this study should be considered a first step toward a fuller discussion of the value of research in academic libraries.

Research First? Assessing the Role of Special Collections Librarians in Academia

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Introduction

Studies attempting to gauge the importance of research to the career of an academic librarian are nothing new; more uncommon are attempts to examine the importance of research done by professional librarians outside the field of librarianship. Rarer still are any investigations into the role of the special collections librarian in the academic research library. That being said, the impetus for this particular study grew out of a library faculty meeting in which the guidelines for a revised promotion document were discussed and debated. An opinion surfaced which suggested that research done outside of the field of librarianship should be weighted less in consideration for promotion, while research in the field of librarianship should be weighted higher. This led the present authors to wonder if opinions like the above were common at other academic libraries, and, if so, how librarians felt about the issue. Being special collections librarians, the authors chose to focus this study on colleagues in special collections and archives across the country. The objectives were twofold: to assess the importance of research in and outside the field of librarianship; and, perhaps more importantly, to gauge how research outside the field of librarianship is valued by administrators and fellow librarians. Three themes organically developed out of the received comments: research, especially outside of the field of librarianship, advances the profession; research advances the librarian and his or her collections; and all scholarly research must be respected in terms of the ALA's tenets of academic freedom.

Literature Review

Montelongo, Gamble, Brar, & Hernandez provided evidence in their 2010 article that conducting research outside of librarianship, in subject disciplines or areas of expertise, can not only benefit a librarian's own institution, but will also boost his or her status and personal job satisfaction. Further, they demonstrated that librarians who do not hold an advanced degree in another subject field are not as adequately prepared to conduct research and serve as subject specialists. Sassen and Wahl (2014) concurred, demonstrating that, while the profession has indeed seen an increase in the requirements for research in academic libraries, library school instructors are simply not preparing future academic librarians to do quality research: in reality, library schools are producing professionals and not scholars. Kennedy and Brancolini (2012) would agree, and found participants in their survey believed that their LIS Master's

Degree program may have prepared them to appreciate research but did not prepare them to conduct it. Coker, vanDuinkerken, and Bales (2010) cited numerous studies that conclude that librarians should not be made tenured faculty because the MLS degree does not prepare graduates to conduct the necessary research. Fleming-May and Douglass (2014) advanced this discussion, insisting that librarians need to take it upon themselves to pursue a more active research agenda in order to enhance their status in the academy, noting the need to increase and publicize their own research, and to seek collaborative opportunities with faculty outside the library. Further, they stressed the need for academic librarians to publish in high-impact, peer-reviewed journals and to participate in high-impact conferences, specifically mentioning non-LIS disciplines as preferential.

Berg, Jacobs, and Cornwall (2013) found in their investigation that, since library administrators are essential to any discussion about librarians and research, the administrative perspective must be a part of any study focused on academic librarianship and research. Certainly, if the administration at any given library shares the view that research should be somehow weighted in one direction or another, then librarians need to know where they stand in their institution, and act accordingly. Montelongo, et al., (2010) also affirm that librarians who want to pursue non-library research need the support and encouragement of their library administrators. They also found that the most support came from administrators who themselves contributed to research in and out of the field of librarianship. Further, those administrators who also pursue an active research agenda provide crucial professional and financial support

for library faculty to engage in scholarship. As Sassen and Wahl (2014) note, however, while most administrators agree that more research support is needed for faculty, and that time to engage in research was an issue, suggesting mentorship programs to assuage these time constraints is often the only proposed solution. Lastly, Perkins and Slowik (2013) demonstrated that administrators do find a multi-tiered value to research by their library faculty to the institution, the university, the profession, and, of course, to the librarians themselves.

The above research notwithstanding, there are still librarians who adhere to a seemingly out of date model of what a research librarian should be. For example, Gorman (2000), and others who follow his approach, still see the library profession as less academic and more professional. Ilesanmi (2013), for example, claims—channeling Gorman—that the roles of a research librarian are: “collection development, knowledge management, preservation of resources, users’ services, and personnel management.” Research and scholarship seemingly do not play a role for the academic research librarian in this framework. Clark, Vardeman, and Barba (2014) attempted to measure the effects of the “Imposter Phenomenon” on research librarians reluctant to pursue research, but their findings still suggested that the pursuit of an active research agenda needs to be a highlight of the library profession, and excuses need to be laid aside. Given the high expectation for research at most institutions, coupled with a normally small allotment of work time allowed for research and scholarship, the situation can often look forbidding. Further, if an active research agenda is required, are all areas of scholarship created equal? It is this question that we wished to put to colleagues in other special collections departments.

Methodology

A link to a survey was sent to the 2484 members of the “Ex Libris” listserv, generating 75 total respondents who were professional librarians working in special collections or archives. All 75 of the respondents started and completed the survey. The approach was both quantitative and qualitative, as we wished to discover statistically how research was treated in other institutions; but, more importantly, we wanted to hear the extensive comments from colleagues in the field about their individual experiences, concerns, and philosophies about research in and outside the field of librarianship. To our surprise, respondents overwhelmingly shared similar feelings toward the principles and philosophy behind research in academia, and these complementary opinions helped shape the discussion

below. All the names and corresponding institutions have been kept confidential for the purposes of this article.

Discussion

Of the 75 respondents to the survey, 39% were tenure-track faculty, 23% were non-tenure track faculty, and 39% did not have faculty status (all percentages have been rounded up or down). Years of service were quite consistently distributed, which was expected given the wide population covered by the survey. Respondents overwhelmingly supported the idea of librarians publishing research outside Library Science (LIS) literature, with only 4% disagreeing. The general consensus, however, reasoned that librarians should only publish in subject areas in which they were experts. In that light, more than two-thirds of the respondents had published or presented on topics outside of Library Science, most notably in history, literature, and the history of the book. Only 25% of the respondents did not publish outside the profession, and of these many were librarians who did not publish or actively pursue any research agenda. Respondents almost universally recognized the value of research and writing outside LIS, with 32% saying it was more important than research within LIS, 57% saying they were of equal importance, and only 3% believing that LIS scholarship was most important. Well over half of those surveyed (57%) thought supervisors had no right to designate their areas of research, with some citing academic freedom; these views greatly outnumbered the 19% who believed supervisors could designate areas for research. Almost all respondents did not think (61%) or did not know (31%) if their institutions gave more credit toward promotion for one discipline over another, while 4% each thought their institutions favored LIS or non-LIS research. Although we did ask about the requirements to publish for promotion and reappointment in each respondent's institution, the question was often misunderstood, rendering the results problematic. For this reason we have left out the question and answers devoted to these requirements.

Taking the qualitative responses as a whole, it soon became clear that respondents to the survey focused their most substantive comments on three major issues; most significantly, perhaps, none of these issues was specifically mentioned in the survey. The three major themes were as follows: 1) research affects the perceived status of librarians and their research compared to other academics, 2) research in other disciplines makes for better librarians, and 3) the notion of academic freedom cannot be ignored.

The Perceived Status of Librarians vs. Other Academic

The most common theme mentioned in the responses was the status of librarianship and its respective research literature. The fact that 32% (n=75) of respondents thought research in other disciplines was more “important” than LIS, while only 3% of librarians defended LIS research as more important, indicates that special collections librarians might not think particularly highly of LIS research. Many respondents found LIS research to be far too confining and unrewarding. “I strongly believe librarians should publish outside of the narrow boundaries of librarianship,” wrote one non-tenured faculty member, while another chided, “Library Science or Book History are [each] too secret a science.” Another faculty librarian indicated succinctly that, “it is more impressive to publish in an academic journal than a library journal.”

Many respondents questioned the legitimacy of LIS research literature, using strong language in their assertions. “Most library literature is crap,” one faculty member curtly wrote, while another called it “so lame.” A tenured librarian offered a more judicious comment: “Library science publishing isn’t particularly rigorous.” Several respondents argued that LIS research is of low quality and little relevance, and were not reluctant to speak their minds: “There is more than enough library literature as it is. We don’t need to drown in 500 more nearly-identical case studies,” wrote one faculty librarian, while another added, “There is too much mediocre library literature.” Tenured faculty members were no less pointed in their comments, with one saying, “Let’s face it, much of ‘library science literature’ is cookie-cutter analysis. How many citation surveys are really necessary?” Another tenured librarian added, “Most library research is poorly written and irrelevant...and most non-librarians do not regard library science literature as scholarly.” A non-faculty librarian chimed in with, “Anything that cuts down on the ‘here is the cool thing we did at my library’ without any ‘so what’ to it is a good thing.”

A handful of other faculty respondents even questioned why library literature existed at all. For these individuals, the motivation for most LIS research is selfish, with one faculty member claiming that most LIS literature exists solely to provide repositories for promotion-related activities: “I’ve always assumed that a great deal of publishing in the library literature was done by people who were seeking tenure in places that granted it.” Mandating research in this way, wrote another faculty librarian, is likely to lead to poorer scholarship: “When research and publication becomes a job responsibility, quantity is likely to be privileged over quality.” However, some librarians still find this to be too much of

a burden, according to another librarian with tenure: “Library faculty at our institution must produce scholarly work in order to be promoted in academic rank, but many choose not to seek promotion and remain at the level of assistant professors.” Another tenured librarian concurred, noting, “Most librarians publish enough to get tenure at associate [rank] then stop.” In a straightforward opinion, one tenured respondent opined, “If you don’t want to do research, then I wouldn’t recommend being an academic librarian/archivist. I feel it goes with the territory.”

A large number of respondents (66%, n=75) felt that limiting librarians to LIS research was far too confining and unrewarding. “I believe that librarianship is too narrow a field to encompass all of the intellectual interests librarians bring to their jobs,” wrote one tenured librarian, while another faculty member admitted, “Library literature is fine, but it falls mainly into the ‘how to’ field. That is not my publication interest.” Another tenured respondent plainly stated, “There is no reason a librarian should give up his subject matter interests when he chooses to enter the profession.” Finally, another touched upon the different roles of librarians, and how that might affect their research, declaring that publishing outside of LIS is “more important for special collections librarians, slightly more important for most other librarians with assigned duties elsewhere. Publishing within the profession is perhaps most important for those in cataloging or technical services areas of academic libraries.”

Regardless of the subject matter pursued, however, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that special collections librarians needed to research and publish in order to solidify their place in the academy. One exacting faculty librarian had particularly strong words for colleagues who did not engage in research, suggesting they “bag at Walmart,” claiming librarians “are equal to faculty in the departments, not servants. It is time the academic library wakes up and shifts away from slave, second class academic citizen mentality to become first among equals with all departments on campus [and] beat them at the academic game. Publish, publicity, research, development etc.” Another tenured respondent shared a similar sentiment in a decidedly more graceful way: “We [at my institution] tend to think of ourselves as faculty first, then as librarians-- and we hire accordingly.”

Better Librarians, Better Collections

Many respondents to the survey strongly believed that research outside the library profession can build better librarians and better collections. In their comments, these individuals pointed out that librarians interested in outreach, collection development, intellectual creativity, and professional

status all had something to gain from research outside LIS. One tenured faculty member felt that, “Librarians in collection management/special or area studies collections should reflect a broader research and publication focus consonant with their individual subject expertise.” Further, some respondents thought librarians could offer new and unique perspectives on other academic disciplines and their research faculty. Said one tenured librarian: “Many of our users and researchers are from outside the library profession and therefore it is good to have articles published in a variety of venues. This not only expands your research profile, but also can expand usage of special collections material by exposing those outside the library profession to materials you have and what types of research is being done with the collection.” Two other tenured faculty members put it simply: said one, “[External research] builds subject knowledge, research skills, and credibility with other faculty,” and the other, “If you are a librarian with a second subject masters or doctorate you should use it. It connects you more closely with colleagues in teaching departments.”

While these views made clear that subject specialists are important in the library profession, it was also stressed that the best specialists should stay active within their chosen fields. That said, a tenured faculty member did note, “Generally speaking, an ‘outside’ field of interest should have some relation to the faculty member’s job.” Another tenured librarian agreed, noting, “We have many faculty here who publish in subjects other than librarianship. However, we tend to expect that the subjects are directly related to their primary responsibilities. For example, it would be normal for our Judaica librarian to publish on Jewish culture/history, but it would be unusual for her to publish on art education even if she’s an expert in that area.” Since special collections “librarians are ideally situated at the intersection of a number of different disciplines,” said one non-faculty librarian, they “can bring new, less insular perspectives to their research.”

Several respondents noted that research within one’s own collections can not only advance the career of the individual librarian, but increase awareness of the collections themselves. Said one tenured librarian, “True curatorship of the objects in our care can only come about by the in-depth examination of them, and their content, as artifacts.” A non-faculty member agreed, noting that, “At the very least, it proves us with an opportunity to approach our collections from a researcher’s perspective. Moreover, in doing research we learn more about the collections in our care.” Summing up all the above opinions, a faculty member reasoned: “[Research in other disciplines] broadens our intellectual horizons; demonstrates familiarity with our collections; [and is] essential to respect from most academic teaching professors.”

Significant research, then, is one of the most important qualities expected of a special collections librarian, and the majority of those surveyed agreed that an active research agenda is crucial. One tenured respondent even declared that there were two classes of special collections librarians: the “bureaucrat” and the “curator”: “The number of bureaucrat Special Collections librarians I encountered is discouraging and perhaps detrimental. So I’ve been on both sides of the Special Collections reference desk and have come to the conclusion: Oh, what a better world it would be if special collections were staffed by subject-matter experts who happen to also have library degrees.”

Overall, however, most respondents clearly acknowledged the necessity of LIS literature alongside the prestige and challenge of publishing outside the profession. One non-faculty respondent wrote, “Publishing outside of library literature gave me an opportunity to highlight collections in my library to an audience that might like to research those collections, while publishing in library literature is an opportunity to share insights, advice, and research with other library colleagues. I think both are valuable and important.” That said, librarians had strong opinions about whether their research areas should be mandated or left up to their professional judgement, bringing up the concept of academic freedom and how that translates to the academic library.

Academic Freedom

The subject of research relating to promotion can be controversial, and some respondents felt institutions and supervisors unfairly make research and publishing demands upon library faculty without providing equitable time and resources to perform these activities. Adding to these difficulties is the fact that some employers give more credit for one kind of research over another. Several respondents pointed out the vastly uneven expectations between faculty librarians and the administrators who judge them, and one tenured faculty member wrote curtly, “leadership must lead by publishing.” Another tenured librarian observed, “academic freedom should still have a prominent place at all institutions. In any case, at the institution where I work I think the total publications by the library administration in the past five years would amount to 5 articles by the 5 senior administrators.” Such a rate of publication would be unlikely to convince a promotion committee with respect to a librarian seeking advancement.

Another theme evoking calls for academic freedom surrounded the creativity and personal interests of the librarians themselves. “It is important for librarians to publish what interests them,” one non-faculty librarian wrote. “It is quite natural,” wrote another faculty member,

“to research and publish in areas that relate to our collections or our interests, which may or may not reflect our collections.” One non-faculty respondent pointed out that librarians who research according to their own interests will likely be much more enthusiastic than someone simply fulfilling a demand for promotion: “It makes sense to take the individual’s qualities and interests into account (he or she will probably excel in those fields anyway).” Special Collections librarianship draws subject specialists whose intellectual curiosity serves them well in their profession, states one tenured faculty member: “Librarians work closely with collections and have a diversity of interests [and] these should be celebrated and encouraged.” Limiting librarians to a certain subject, claims a non-faculty librarian, would not only limit individuals’ academic freedom, but would hurt the disciplines they contribute to: “To confine us all to one box seems counter-productive, both in terms of individual advancement and in terms of scholarship - our specialized skills lend themselves well to research in all areas, not just the library profession.” The wider interests of special collections librarians were also noted, with one faculty librarian noting: “I hope that [supervisors] would take a broad view about what contributes to the profession. The nature of scholarly work, which must be very narrow, is often diametrically opposed to the broad interests that special collection librarians must have.”

Instead of forcing librarians into subject-specific corners, perhaps administrators should be guiding employees to be better researchers in general, claimed several respondents; and, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, perhaps librarians should be judged on their individual merits and aptitudes. Said one tenured librarian: “I think that supervisors and administrators should help develop and guide research activities, particularly for junior faculty, but not outright designate them. It should be up to the individual librarian to determine their best research plan, in consultation with supervisors and peers, unless of course the librarian is hired specifically to accomplish particular research activities.” This same librarian openly states that, “I would not support an environment where specific disciplines were outright pre/proscribed.” “In an ideal world,” responded another tenured faculty member, “scholarship guidelines would be set at the department level. This is how the academic colleges work. Libraries, however, rarely do that and that’s where the conflicts occasionally arise.”

There were dissenting opinions, of course. Some respondents (19%, n=75) felt that the leadership or administration could designate areas for librarians’ research; a few insisted that research should be directly associated with one’s job, while others admitted that employers could make demands on the direction of research. More than 58% advocated

academic freedom for special collections librarians, however. But the most important factor in research, those respondents wrote, is the quality of one's research, not the subject matter: "Publications should be gauged by their content and their impact on whatever profession is being impacted," wrote one tenured librarian, while another agreed, stating, "Library administrators and T[enure] & P[romotion] Committee members should leave such matters to the individuals to decide, as long as the resulting product meets professional standards and is accepted for publication in a peer-reviewed journal." Young, non-faculty librarians also took up the case, with one saying, "I think I should be free to determine which disciplines I publish in. They have a right to designate how many articles of what level of scholarship, but limiting to specific disciplines feels an awful lot like censorship." Another new librarian added, "The librarian should be able to make a case for why a discipline is appropriate for his/her work." Faculty librarians agreed with their younger colleagues, noting, "What matters is publishing good stuff, regardless of the field," and, "I don't think [administration] have a right to require publication in an outside discipline, nor to disregard extra-disciplinary publications for the purpose of promotion." Regardless of the areas of research pursued, therefore, the majority of special collections librarians hold tight to the tenets of academic freedom.

Limitations and Future Study

The limitations to a study such as this are clear: only special collections librarians took the survey and offered their comments. However, this selectivity did offer some useful information as to how special collections professionals view themselves in comparison with their colleagues in other areas of the field, and how they felt about restrictions and limitations involved in pursuing an active research agenda. There seems to be a clear need for studies like this to expand to cover the entire profession, so that conclusions like those found in Montelongo, et al. (2010) can be further substantiated. In order for a project like that to have maximum impact, however, a much larger pool of respondents would be desired. The demand for research from administrators and institutions is not going away; therefore it is time that research librarians to accept this fact and find a way to achieve a more respected tier in the academy.

Conclusions

The origins of this article lay in a discussion concerning librarians and promotion: should research done in the field of librarianship be weighted higher than research done outside the field? As special collections librarians, the authors felt strongly that research should be judged on the merit of the scholarship, not the focus. But we wanted to survey a broader group of special collections librarians to gauge their assessments of the issue. 88% of respondents (n=75) agreed that a balance should be struck between scholarship undertaken in and outside the field of librarianship, and nearly two-thirds believe that such a balance should not be mandated in the interests of academic freedom. As this study has shown, it is clear that special collections librarians have strong feelings on the subject of research and how it should be undertaken; but despite our anticipated channels of discussion, the most significant findings from the survey were the unsolicited comments from respondents. Yet whether librarians fell in the 3% who would agree that “Our job is to continually improve and advance the library profession” while neglecting all outside research, or in the 32% who felt outside research was more significant than LIS, nearly all recognized that an active research agenda is necessary to solidify librarians’ roles in the academy. Perhaps it is time for special collections librarians to lead the charge to make ours a more dignified and well-respected profession; and, if we are successful in our scholarship, contributions to LIS publications may be seen more favorably. Regardless, according to our findings, the way forward starts with research first.

Appendix I: Quantitative Survey Results

How long have you worked in a Special Collections setting?

0-5 years: 15

6-10 years: 18

11-15 years: 17

16-20 years: 4

Over 20 years: 21

Are you a faculty member at your institution? If so, are you a tenure-track faculty member?

Tenure: 29

Faculty: 17

Non-Fac: 29

Do you feel that librarians should publish research outside of the library profession (history, arts, humanities, other disciplines)? Why?

Yes: 66

No: 3

Maybe: 6

Have you published research/articles outside of strictly library literature? What disciplines have you published in?

Yes: 56 (28 in history, 9 in literature)

No: 19

Do you feel that publishing outside the library profession is more important, less important, or of the same importance as publishing in the field of library science?

Same: 43

More: 24

N/A: 6

LIS: 2

Do you think the leadership and/or peers at your institution have a right to designate which disciplines you should publish in for credit toward promotion and/or tenure?

No: 43

Yes: 14

Maybe: 7

N/A: 11

Does your institution give you more credit for publications in one academic discipline over others?

More for LIS: 3

More for other: 3

No: 46

N/A: 23

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